

Truth Is Stranger: 'Traitor' to Hero

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A preview of "The Counterfeit Traitor," opening at the DeMille on April 17, was held recently for the film's most knowledgeable and severe critic, Eric Erickson, the subject of the Perlberg-Seaton spy thriller. The Brooklyn-born Swedish business man who became a spy weighs his film image and finds it not wanting.

By Joseph Morgenstern

Among the unforeseeable pitfalls that a man must face when he signs on as a spy is the possibility that no one will make a movie of his exploits. His mission may go haywire, as in the case of Messrs. Powers and Abel, who are alive but not cinematic, or he may succeed in becoming an unsung hero, which is less remunerative than being a sung hero.

Eric Erickson, one of the more audacious double-dealers employed by the United States in World War II, had the manifold good fortune of emerging from his adventures alive, intact, successful and celebrated. One day last week, Mr. Erickson sat himself down in a screening room in the Paramount Building to see, for the first time, the Technicolor fruits of his efforts, a film called "The Counterfeit Traitor" in which he is incarnated by William Holden.

Director's Query

As soon as the lights went up after the preview, George Seaton, the director and author of the screenplay, said:

"Still talking to me, Eric?"

Momentarily subdued and obviously moved, Mr. Erickson said:

"It's a remarkable picture, George." Certain events had been embellished, rearranged or borrowed from other espionage cases, Mr. Erickson said later, but he thought the movie was entirely authentic in spirit and "85 per cent correct" in the specifics of the story.

The Right Circles

Based on Alexander Klein's book, "The Counterfeit Traitor" recounts Mr. Erickson's experiences as a Swedish oil executive who adopted a pro-Nazi attitude in public, ingratiated himself with German officials in Stockholm, made frequent visits to oil refineries in the German heartland, and supplied the Allies with detailed information on how to bomb them out of existence. For his labors, he suffered the opprobrium of the Swedish press and of most of his friends for the duration of the war, until the real nature of his activities could be revealed.

Born in Brooklyn 72 years ago,

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Mr. Erickson was a football star at Cornell. He went into the oil business, traveled all over the world, settled in Stockholm and became a Swedish citizen in 1936. From the standpoint of the Americans who recruited him, he had valuable contacts in the German oil business. From the standpoint of the Germans who confided in him, he traveled in the right social and commercial circles in Sweden, among people who were in a position to buy German oil and finally, when the Wehrmacht's fuel reserves were perilously low, to supply the funds and the territory for constructing a German refinery under the shelter of Swedish neutrality.

Athletic Grace

Time and events have been good to Mr. Erickson. He looks no older than 55, carries his big frame with the pride and grace of an athlete, has a crunching handshake, and speaks in a loud, unmodulated voice. On the playing fields of Cornell he got his nose broken, and in the years he spent in Sweden he succumbed to the Scandinavian habit of tacking an interrogatory "Huh?" at the end of his sentences. He now makes his home in Sweden in the summer and Menton, on the French Riviera, in the winter.

"It just seems like yesterday. I must say the film is more authentic than the book, huh? When George showed me the manuscript, I went over it and said this wasn't so and that wasn't so, and so on and so forth until most of the fiction was out of it."

Learning His Trade

Mr. Seaton didn't want to diminish the value of his source material. "I thought the book was wonderful," he said. "It treated espionage on a higher plane, without the usual trench coats, snub-nosed revolvers and fog-bound streets. I didn't know a thing about espionage when I began, and I spent more than a year doing research, about eight weeks of it at the Library of Congress reading nothing but 'Espionage, W. W. II.'"

If for no other reason, the Perlberg-Seaton film distinguishes itself from most of its predecessors in the genre by taking an unsentimental view of the morality of spying. Its candor coincides with that of Mr. Erickson himself.

a bon vivant who felt that no holds or clinches were barred in his work.

"The only time I felt cheap is when I ran around with Hermann Goering's sister-in-law and used her to a fare-thee-well." Of another lady who figured in his adventures, Clara Moltz, Mr. Erickson said: "She's a good-lookin' jane, even today."

A few incidents in the film, such as a dramatic bicycle blockade on the streets of Copenhagen, were interpolated from other espionage accounts that Mr. Seaton discovered in his research. Yet there is nothing counterfeit about Mr. Erickson's contribution to the Allied cause. If anything, it was understated in the picture.

"I gather the film takes dramatic liberties with the facts as the book did," said Walter Surrey, who was in charge of Economic Warfare for the O. S. S. in war-time Sweden and is now a Washington attorney. "And some of the facts will never be known. Certain things did happen to Erickson in Ger-

many, but no one was there with him to say what they were. All we do know is what was published."

Of his major services to the identification of the German oil plants in Germany. But there were other services he performed that are neither in the book nor the movie. He gave us information on a crucial shortage of ball bearings in Japan, on the Germans' attempt to move their assets from Norway to Sweden, and he was involved in the first indication of a Japanese offer to surrender.

"He was a great spy," Mr. Surrey said. "He broke every rule in the book, he did everything wrong except succeed."

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*A sea captain in the Danish underground and Eric Erick
portrayed by William Holden in "The Counterfeit Traitor,"
Jewish refugee on the last lap of a flight from the Nazis.*

COLIN KIRSTEIN Gene